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ABSTRACT

Critical of the language instruction which students receive in elementary and secondary schools, the author examines the teaching potential of televised instruction. Foreign language instruction in the elementary school is noted to be particularly weak. Discussion of an experiment involving some 800 children in 4th and 5th grades suggests that televised instruction can yield satisfactory academic results. (RL)

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The Television Teacher – How Near, How Far?

Between the Olympian heights of the scholar of French literature and the average student obligated and, at times, eager to take French in college, there lies a gap so wide that only the foolhardy or the unusually gifted are willing to cross it. The listings in college catalogues should suffice to call our attention to this danger. For regardless of the fact that the vast majority of college students have not studied any foreign language in elementary school or highschool, or have done so at most for one or two years in highschool or college, our colleges offer courses in literature which, in form and content, ignore the elementary nature of the students' preparation. Thus it happens that foreign languages and literatures are reserved almost entirely for the handful of students who decide to major in them.

For a number of years it seemed that FLES (Foreign Languages in Elementary Schools) would offer a solution to this problem. But thus far FLES has not kept its promises. The enthusiastic beginnings of the movement in different parts of the country have, only too frequently, remained isolated and collapsed of malnutrition. There are few places where the initial excitement has been welded into solid achievement. For lack of sufficient understanding on the part of educators, FLES has come to represent only too often a child's joyful boasting that he can speak French, illustrated by his singing of *Frère Jacques, frère Jacques,* which may well sound like "Faire Joka, faire Joka . . . ," if his mother's Hungarian nickname happens to be Szoka. In some cases he may have learned to say "bonjour" or to answer the question "qui porte un chandail vert?" with the bold assertion "Marie porte un chandail vert." FLES, unfortunately, has failed to establish standards of achievement for its pupils and teachers, who may well have concluded that all one can achieve on the elementary school level is the creation of enthusiasm for the language.

FLES' greatest weakness has been its lack of qualified instructors. The aural-oral approach on which most FLES teaching is based requires of the teacher an understanding very different from that which may be acquired from a highschool or college text. The texture and fiber of a language prove to be of a different nature if approached from the aural-oral angle, and so are the consistencies and inconsistencies that we usually refer to as grammar. Contrary to wide-

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spread assumption it is not easier but harder to teach a language on the elementary school level.

The leadership needed here cannot possibly come from elementary school teachers, who may have a sketchy knowledge of the language acquired by the traditional method. Neither can it be furnished by the similarly prepared highschool teacher. It can only be supplied by individuals who have a more profound theoretical knowledge of the language and, in addition, a broader practical acquaintance with it. It must come, therefore, from institutions of higher learning both with regard to the actual teaching and the training of teachers. Because of this, television which permits one teacher to reach a large number of pupils suggests itself as a solution—if a language *can* be taught by television or "distant viewing."

Unlikely as this assumption would seem, facts appear to prove its feasibility. A research project, for instance, which I have directed at the University of Pennsylvania, has shown clearly that televised teaching on the elementary school level can stimulate serious language study. Last spring, at the end of eight months of daily fifteen-minute lessons—equalling about thirty full hours—a forty-two-minute test was given to the participating pupils. Its results showed clearly that the 710 fourth-graders and ninety fifth-graders (enrolled in fourteen public schools and one private school in Pennsylvania and New Jersey) had assimilated a large percentage of the material introduced during the course. The test, examining aural comprehension of expressions and stories and touching lightly upon grammar as well as the ability to differentiate between related sounds, represented a fair sample of the 600 words which had been introduced orally in varying contexts.

Of the 749 children (not selected on any basis) who actually took the test, thirty-five submitted perfect papers.

the first quartile ranged from	100-92
the second from	91-84
the third from	83-73

Only 77 of all pupils (roughly 10%) had test scores of 60 or below.

Of the 28 participating classes (about two in each school), all had one or more scores above 90, and 23 had one or more scores between 96 and 100.

That this achievement was primarily based on the contribution made by television is established by the fact that not a single teacher in any of the 28 classrooms was qualified to teach French, and that the achievement of classes where the teacher had no knowledge what-

soever of the language or only one or two years of highschool training equalled and often surpassed that of classes where the teacher had studied French in either highschool or college for a few years. In most cases the teachers themselves eagerly learned from the daily televised lessons, and it was their interest and active participation which added another stimulus to the students' language learning experience.

How distant, then, is television?

If we think of language teaching above all in terms of correcting individual mistakes, television seems very distant indeed. But if we free ourselves from some of our prejudices based on tradition, we will readily admit that the natural language learning of the child—that unexcelled process—takes place informally. It is not based on a teacher's presence and perpetual interference. Hearing the language is, of course, the first prerequisite. But beyond that, constant repetition must be considered the factor that enables the child to detach from the chaos of sounds which surround it those that are meaningful. If he himself repeats those sounds, though with varying degrees of perfection, he ultimately achieves a perfect pronunciation —*in spite of* the delight which his parents usually take in these imperfections. That television can teach informally and through repetition is a truth that has long been recognized by advertisers, and that is demonstrated every day by small children who sing with perfect ease the advertising jingles of commercial television. In teaching a language by television we should be able to rely, therefore, on the teaching power of repetition as well as on the process of self-correction that accompanies it.

Such repetition can be supplied by televised teaching in endless variety, if we use all the artistic registers of the medium. To mention just one example, a book can be asked for (in French) in a library, in a book store, at a stall on one of the quays in Paris, or in a classroom. It can be exchanged between students, pupil and teacher, buyer and seller, as well as among puppets that have acquired definite personalities on the television screen. The exchange may take place against a life-like Parisian background, between shadows in a shadow play, or just between hands that the camera catches in the act. It may be part of a larger story or merely a brief exchange of words in action. But whatever form is given it, the dialogue connected with the action will be observed and heard as well as participated in and re-enacted by the student. That the possibilities here are endless and that even the mistakes that may occur in the re-enacting can be anticipated by an experienced teacher becomes obvious, I think. In that manner, "distant viewing" becomes a rather integral and immediate part of a student's experience.

Based on the same principle of repetition rather than on individual

correction of mistakes, even grammatical patterns can be as easily and informally conveyed to the pupils in the classroom as they are transmitted to the child learning his own language. The pupil who has learned to say "j'ai un livre français" and "achetez un livre français" can proceed effortlessly towards saying "j'ai acheté un livre français," since he is unaware of the particular logic involved in the different spelling of *achetez* and *acheté*. If the language is approached aurally, the past tense represents but the combination of sounds already known, and the pattern is easily assimilated. Yet experience has shown that the venturesome student may apply this pattern to verbs behaving differently. Like the child learning his own language, the student in a televised class might conclude that the past participle of *prenez* (the imperative so familiar to him) is formed in analogy to *acheté*. But even here the television teacher's anticipation and her repetition of the correct form seem capable of establishing that form sooner or later.

With regard to the demonstrational aspect of teaching, television becomes "near" rather than "distant vision" as compared to classroom teaching. Paris or any other part of France can be made to enter a classroom via the television screen, which makes a two-dimensional picture look almost real. Breakfast can be ordered on a simulated terrace of a French café, where the waiter brings *croissants* and *café au lait*. If attention is to be called to the pouring of the *café au lait*, the camera can concentrate on and enlarge that particular activity and thus help the student to associate it with the accompanying linguistic experience. It is above all in pronunciation that the demonstrational force of television can be called upon. Facial close-ups can convey more vividly the manner of pronunciation than any description, and usually almost compel the viewer to involuntary or, if exhorted, voluntary imitation.

But although demonstration has always been and will continue to be an important factor in effective teaching, it would seem that television cannot bring about the spontaneous exchange between student and teacher which we like to associate with the ideal learning situation. Television is therefore usually thought of as a medium that reduces its viewers to passivity, at best, to lifeless sponges soaking up information. This, of course, would not be conducive to language learning which, like any activity involving the acquisition of a skill, requires the active patticipation of the learner. But here again reality refutes assumption. Strangely enough, a person speaking into the camera seems to address each individual student in even the largest classroom—somewhat in the manner in which the eyes of a portrait may attach themselves to the beholder at various angles. The suggestive power of a person appearing on a television screen may be such that the student can be induced to repeat statements, to answer

questions, to engage in activities of all sorts, and even to engage in dialogue and competition with his fellow students. The feeling of proximity to the television teacher, on the part of a young student, may in fact be so strong that he is convinced that the teacher can both hear and see him or her. It is, therefore, an almost frightening experience to listen to a tape recording of a televised lesson made in a classroom, because such a recording seems to attest to the teacher's presence in that room from which, in reality, he or she was miles removed. So strong is the rapport between students and teacher, so spontaneous the play of question and answer and the laughter that may accompany them.

Letters from pupils also startlingly reveal this experience of proximity. Such letters may express gratefulness for something which occurred in the ordinary process of teaching but which the students considered especially planned for them. Letters reveal, above all, that the students are unaware of the fact that each is but one among thousands (this year 3,500 children are participating in the lessons), and that they think of their relationship with the television teacher as one that is both personal and unique. This is perhaps most charmingly illustrated by a letter from one nine-year-old boy. Asked at the end of a brief quiz period to report the number of mistakes they made, most students sent in statements such as "I made no mistake" or "I made one mistake," but the expansive answer from this particular boy read: "I love you so much I cannot tell you how I feel about you. I made six mistakes."

To make an exchange between pupil and television teacher still more feasible, however, the following device occurred to me: It is actually possible to assign French names to the children in each classroom and to call on them by name. If one knows the number of students in the largest class participating and also is familiar with the distribution of boys and girls in the various classes, one can dstribute—in whatever arbitrary order one wishes to establish, since the order is quite immaterial—enough names to have one for each student in that class. In the smaller classes, which do not need as large a supply, some students may acquire an additional middle name, so that for each name there is a student and for each student at least one name. In that way, one Jean will get up in each classroom when the television teacher says "Jean, levez-vous"—convinced of his individuality and proud of his new name, though totally unaware of the fact that he shares it with one other person in each of the other classrooms. Imagination as well as experience are, undoubtedly, necessary if the questions are to elicit answers and if totally ridiculous situations and errors are to be avoided. But given these, the atmosphere during a televised French lesson can hardly be designated as one of languid passivity. It may culminate in virtual

excitement during a televised quiz period when groups are teamed against each other in an effort to give answers to questions or to arithmetic problems, or when they try to supply the missing word of a statement or to determine whether the statement "j'ai mal au pied" implies that *pied* is masculine or feminine.

Although much more experimentation is necessary to permit any definite conclusions, it would seem that television is not too "distant" to be used as a medium for language teaching on the elementary school level, and that both the students and their teachers can profit from it. For the teachers who studied French for one or two years in highschool or college and "forgot it all" find that "it all comes back" to them in a more meaningful manner. The most ingenious among them, who supply their students with opportunities to use the expressions learned, find additional satisfaction for themselves and their pupils. A close cooperation with these classroom teachers can help to evaluate the effectiveness of certain methods of televised teaching. It can, at the same time, provide these teachers with additional information concerning the thinking behind FLES teaching and the possible integration of the student's language experience in his daily curriculum.

It would seem possible, therefore, to visualize televised teaching as one solution to the impasse which the development of FLES has reached, both for actual teaching and for the eventual training of language teachers for FLES. Television could be used to aid in establishing standards of achievement for such teaching. For televised tests can be tried out on a large and heterogenous group of pupils. Once such standards of achievement are outlined, FLES could, indeed, contribute to a revision of the unsatisfactory state of language learning. If it can help to supply colleges with students well-grounded in at least one foreign language and who are able to pursue their studies of literature or science in that language on their age level rather than begin to learn a language more or less in the manner of a child, FLES will have proved its value. If it does nothing but produce a brief period of enthusiasm soon to evaporate, it might well be dispensed with in favor of more serious pursuits.

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